**Education Directorate Bushfire Support Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):**

**Health advice for smoke conditions:**

The heavy smoke and poor air quality impacting the ACT due to the bushfires is also impacting a range of ACT Government services, including our schools.

The Directorate is implementing a range of strategies to eliminate or minimise the impact of the current heat and smoky conditions on staff and students, in our schools and all other workplaces.

We know that the varying air quality affects individuals differently. We encourage staff to speak up if they are feeling the effects of smoke and poor air quality, and to take regular breaks and to stay hydrated. We have supports in place to assist staff during this time.

We encourage any staff members whom are deemed vulnerable/sensitive under Chief Health Officer definition to seek medical advice and speak with your supervisor about reasonable adjustments if applicable.

The Directorate is monitoring the conditions based on advice from the Chief Health Officer and will provide updates as required. The following FAQs have been developed to assist the Directorate in the management of these extreme conditions. These FAQs should be read in conjunction with Head of Service Guidance for Directorates – Employee wellbeing and air quality communications.

**Q.** ***What are the common symptoms of exposure to the smoky air?***

**A.** Depending on the degree of air quality impacted by smoke and activities undertaken, most healthy people will be able to manage work with very few symptoms during mild to moderate smoky conditions.   
During severe impacts to air quality, most healthy people will experience symptoms if exposed to the smoky conditions.

Common reactions people may experience with heavy smoke include:

* itchy or burning eyes
* throat irritation
* runny nose, and
* coughing

More information about the health impacts of the smoky conditions is provided by ACT Health [here](https://health.act.gov.au/public-health-alert/heavy-smoke-and-hot-conditions-act#heavysmoke).

***Q. What do I need to do to manage working in the smoky conditions?***

**A**. It is important to consider your own health and safety and the health and safety of others in the workplace. Whilst we can’t control the environmental conditions, we do have options that reduce exposure to smoke and poor air quality.

Some immediate ways to help you manage are:

* minimise prolonged or heavy physical activity outdoors, and when there is heavy smoke in the area it is best to avoid all physical activity outdoors.
* if you are outside, take plenty of breaks indoors in areas where the air is cool and not smoky.
* Avoid getting dehydrated. Drink plenty of cool fluids, preferably water.
* Use lozenges to soothe sore throats.

**Q*. My school / ESO building has poor air quality, and I feel unwell what should I do?***

**A.** If you are feeling unwell you should advise your supervisor, leave the workplace and seek medical advice.

Supervisor - You should contact the Education Directorate WHS Hotline 6207 0614 to notify the Directorate of the employee impact and seek guidance on a risk assessment / wellbeing supports.

**Q. *I have advised a staff member to go home because they are unwell. Should I complete a Riskman report on their behalf?***

**A.** Yes, you can complete the report on their behalf so there is documentation of the incident with the corrective actions implemented, e.g. advised staff member to seek medical advice. Staff who are unwell as a result of the smoke or otherwise or particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of smoke, should be encouraged to seek their own medical advice in the first instance and to follow that advice. You should let your supervisor know of any reasonable adjustments or supports you may need to return to work.

**Q.** ***The majority of my work is outdoors. Will I be able to work outdoors?***

**A.** You will need to discuss with your supervisor about how you will do your work, or whether you can reschedule or postpone your outdoor work. You, your manager and your team will need to think about how you can avoid or reduce physical work particularly outdoors. You will need to consider if there is any equipment that can assist you to be safe whilst you do your work. This might include using a P2 /N95 mask for periods when you are outside.

Wearing a P2/N95 mask does not mean that you can work outside for extended periods on days of poor air quality. Other options will need to be considered to manage the risks to your health and safety.

<https://www.health.act.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-01/Information%20sheet%20-%20use%20of%20masks%20-%206%20Jan%202020.pdf>

**Q. *I have asthma (or another respiratory/coronary), which is self-managed, what can I do to manage my health while at work?***

**A.** Due to the close-fitting nature of the mask and the filter mechanism, staff with some health conditions find that wearing a mask makes them feel worse. If you have existing heart or lung conditions, it is recommended that you seek medical advice prior to using a mask and ensure it is safe to do so. Depending on the recommendations provided by your health care professional, you will need to discuss any particular needs with your supervisor.

**Q. *How long can I use P2 masks for?***

**A.** P2/N95 masks shouldn’t be used for more than 8 hours, but the duration of effectiveness is impacted by:

• moisture

• the volume of air passing through the filter; and

• the concentration of particles in the air.

You will need to replace your mask when it becomes contaminated or you feel that it becomes difficult to draw air through the filter. Masks should be replaced at a minimum of every eight hours of use

Please refer to the [use of P2/N95 Masks factsheet](https://health.act.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-01/Information%20sheet%20-%20use%20of%20masks%20-%206%20Jan%202020.pdf) for further information.

**Q.** ***As a manager/supervisor, can I send my staff home to work if I am concerned by the smoke in the workplace?***

**A.** Please contact either your Education Directorate WHS Hotline or the HR Business Partner Hotline (contact details below) who will assess the workplace and assist with the determination of short term working from home arrangements or other solutions.

**Q*. My school has organised excursions i.e. camps and swimming carnivals in term one. Should these excursions go******ahead in these conditions?***

**A.** Please contact the Education Directorate WHS Hotline in the first instance to seek advice on the risk assessment process.

**Q.** ***Will the Directorate continue to monitor and provide advice on air quality in the short term?***

**A.** Yes, this will continue to be communicated by the Directorate. Local sites should monitor conditions and use controls suitable. Warnings issued by ACT Health state that in some circumstances, this poor air quality poses a health hazard, particularly for people performing strenuous work outside, or for people who are sensitive to smoke and air pollution or have specified medical conditions.

**Q.** ***What happens when staff and students are due to return to school and the smoky conditions remain?***

**A.** The Directorate is working hard to plan for the return of our staff and students to school. We are identifying the risks and implementing mitigation strategies to eliminate or minimise the impact of the current heat and smoke conditions on staff and students in our schools and all other workplaces. We are particularly looking at the areas that need to undertake strenuous or outdoor work and seeing how we can postpone or reschedule that work to when conditions improve, looking at how we rotate staff and providing masks to staff doing this type of work when appropriate. We will be updating our school and our staff over the coming weeks as this work progresses.

Please contact your Education Directorate WHS Hotline prior to the commencement of Term 1 if you have concerns.

**Q. *As a manager/supervisor should I contact my staff to do a wellbeing and safety check?***

**A.**Yes, as a supervisor you should contact your staff by phone call or SMS.  Offer EAP supports if required (contact details are listed below).

Supervisor – If you are advised that your staff member has been impacted directly by the fires please contact the HR Business Partner Hotline so the Directorate can provide support and have oversight of impacts to staff.

***Q. What do I do if my staff are unable to return to work?***

**A.**Contact the HR Business Partner Hotline who will assist with the coordination with School Operations.Ensure managers and supervisors are aware of leave options available for staff and refer any questions, or concerns with leave requests to their Corporate teams.

**Q. *What if I have staff that are directly impacted by the bushfires?***

**A.**A range of supports are available for people impacted by the bushfires. Provide whatever support you can in the immediate instance, perhaps using this FAQ.

You can then contact either your WH&S Advisor or HR Business Partner to assist in providing the next steps of relevant support. More information is provided below on supports available and the Index link for EAP.

<https://index.ed.act.edu.au/our-people/employee-assistance-program.html>

**Leave Arrangements:**

***Q: Where can I get information on leave arrangements for my staff?***

***A:*** Understanding leave arrangements can be complicated. You should assist your staff with an immediate response that it is likely that there are leave options available, and then liaise with your HR Business partner to provide information specific for their circumstances. Refer to Enterprise Agreement links below for more detail.

***Q: I am not feeling well due to the smoke in the air, can I go home from work?***

**A:** Yes. If you are feeling unwell at work, you can access your personal leave in accordance with Clause F4*, ‘Personal Leave’* of your relevant Enterprise Agreement. Any employee leaving work due to illness should advise their manager.

***Q: I have been on annual leave and have been affected by the fires can I recredit my leave to personal leave or other leave?***

**A:** Yes, depending on your circumstances you may be entitled to access other leave such as personal leave, leave in extraordinary or unforeseen circumstances or leave to cope with a disaster under ‘other leave provisions’. You should discuss with your supervisor/manager and contact the HR Business Partners if you need specific advice.

***Q: I have a home affected by bushfires; can I take leave?***

**A:** Yes. In accordance with your relevant Enterprise Agreement, *Annex A, Part 9*, *Cope with a disaster,* where an employee is affected by a disaster which has destroyed or significantly damaged the employee’s usual place of residence or its contents, employees are entitled to leave to cope with a disaster. This is accessed via the Shared Services portal under ‘other leave’.

Supervisor – Please advise the HR Business Partner Hotline of impacted staff.

***Q: I am caring for family members who are displaced due to the fires and am not able to work, what leave can I access?***

**A:** Employees with caring responsibilities that prevent them from working on the day should apply for carers’ leave as usual. Employees, with their managers approval, may access personal leave or personal leave in extraordinary circumstances in accordance with Clause F4*, ‘Personal Leave’* or Clause F5, *‘Personal Leave in Extraordinary Circumstances’* of their relevant Enterprise Agreement. Evidence may be required to support the leave application.

***Q: I have exhausted my personal leave but cannot attend work, what leave can I access?***

A: Where personal leave credits have been exhausted, the Head of Service in accordance with Clause F4.15 of the employees relevant Enterprise Agreement may, subject to the production of documentary evidence, grant an employee a period of unpaid personal leave for personal illness or injury or for the care or support of a member of the employee’s immediate family or household who is ill or injured or affected by an unexpected emergency.

Contact HR Business Partner Hotline to discuss the application process.

***Q: My workplace is affected by smoke; can I work from home?***

A: You should talk to your supervisor in the first instance to discuss working from home options.

Supervisor - Please contact the Education Directorate WHS Hotline in the first instance to seek advice on the risk assessment process.

***Q: I am a Defence Reservist and have been called to duty, what leave am I entitled to?***

A: All employees that are current Defence Force Reservists, other than casual employees are entitled to Defence Reserve leave, in accordance with *Annex D, Part 10* of their relevant Enterprise Agreement.

**Q*. I volunteer within the community, am I entitled to leave to assist during the bushfire crisis?***

**A**. Yes. In accordance with Clause F13, ‘Community Service Leave’ is available to employees to allow them to be absent from the workplace to engage in voluntary emergency management activities (State or Territory Emergency Service, firefighting service, search and rescue unit or other volunteer service performing similar duties) or other recognised voluntary community service activity. The Enterprise Agreement allows for 4 days paid community service leave to engage in voluntary emergency management activities. Additional leave may also be requested under clause F13.22.

**ACT Education Directorate Enterprise Agreements:**

[ACT PUBLIC SECTOR ADMINISTRATIVE AND RELATED CLASSIFICATIONS ENTERPRISE AGREEMENT 2018 – 2021](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1266175/Admin-Final-Agreement-October-2018-for-access.pdf)

[ACT PUBLIC SECTOR INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES ENTERPRISE AGREEMENT 2018 – 2021](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1280468/Infrastructure-Services-Enterprise-Agreement-2018-2021.pdf)

[ACT PUBLIC SECTOR  EDUCATION DIRECTORATE (TEACHING STAFF)  ENTERPRISE AGREEMENT 2018 – 2022](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1374637/ACTPS-Education-Directorate-Teaching-Staff-Enterprise-Agreement-2018-2022.pdf)

[ACT PUBLIC SECTOR TECHNICAL AND OTHER PROFESSIONAL ENTERPRISE AGREEMENT 2018 – 2021](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1319480/Technical-and-Other-Professional-Enterprise-Agreement-2018-2021-for-access.pdf)

[ACT PUBLIC SECTOR HEALTH PROFESSIONAL ENTERPRISE AGREEMENT 2018 – 2021](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1343851/Health-Professional-Enterprise-Agreement2018-2021.pdf)

[ACT PUBLIC SECTOR SUPPORT SERVICES ENTERPRISE AGREEMENT 2018 – 2021](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1336776/ACTPS-Support-Services-Enterprise-Agreement-2018-2021.pdf)

**People and Performance ACT Education Directorate Contacts:**

**Workplace Health and Safety**

Hotline: 6207 0614

[Eduhealthandwellbeing@act.gov.au](mailto:Eduhealthandwellbeing@act.gov.au)

**HR Business Partners**

Hotline: 6207 9772

[Hrbp.edu@act.gov.au](mailto:Hrbp.edu@act.gov.au)

**Wellbeing Advice:**

The recent bushfires have impacted more than the physical environment and can have a impact on the mental health and wellbeing of affected families, individuals, communities and all those involved with fighting the fires.

If you or someone you know has been affected by the bushfires and are in need some extra support, we strongly encourage you to reach out, share and access the services available.

Many of these services are also free to access.

Where to find help:

**[National Crisis Support](https://www.lifeinmindaustralia.com.au/communities/in-a-crisis)**

* **Lifeline: 13 11 14**
* **Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467**
* **Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511**
* **Men’s Line Australia: 1300 78 99 78**
* **Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636**
* **Grief Line: 1300 845 745**
* **Disaster Welfare Assistance Line: 1800 018 444**

**Youth Support**

* **Kids Help Line: 1800 551 800**
* **Headspace: 1800 650 890**
* **Reach Out:** [**https://au.reachout.com/**](https://au.reachout.com/)

**Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)**

* **Converge International: 1300 687 327**
* **Benestar: 1300 360 364**
* **Assure: 1300 505 015**
* **People Sense: 1300 307 912**

**Online Counselling Services:**

**NewAccess:**

* NewAccess is a free service that involves an initial assessment with up to 60 minutes of five sessions with a NewAccess coach. NewAccess is currently only available ACT, QLD and NSW.
* NewAccess can be contacted on 02 6287 8066.
* For more information visit [www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess)
* Helpline Online – Personal email responses to helpline enquiries via the SANE website.
* Helpline Chat – Real time online chat service.
* [SANE Forums](http://saneforums.org/) – An online peer-to-peer support service, operated in partnership with other mental health organisations around the country.
* For more information visit [www.sane.org/](http://www.sane.org/)

**Information Services:**

**Australian Red Cross Register. Find. Reunite**

* Use this register to let people know you are safe. This register can be also used to find people that may be affected by an emergency. Reunite is a matching process that enables the Red Cross to share details to connect family, friends and loved ones.
* <https://register.redcross.org.au/>

**The Way Ahead Directory**

* Provides the ability to search for local mental health and community services in your area.
* [www.directory.wayahead.org.au/](http://www.directory.wayahead.org.au/)

**Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (RAMHP)**

* There are 19 coordinators based across regional, rural and remote NSW who inform, educate and connect individuals, communities to local mental health services and resources and respond in times of natural disasters and severe adversity.
* [www.ramhp.com.au/](https://www.ramhp.com.au/)